

## Lehigh University Lehigh Preserve

---

Volume 15 - 2007

Lehigh Review

---

2007

# Bad Intentions: Why Analyzing Authorial Intentions Fails

Chris Knight

Follow this and additional works at: <http://preserve.lehigh.edu/cas-lehighreview-vol-15>

---

### Recommended Citation

Knight, Chris, "Bad Intentions: Why Analyzing Authorial Intentions Fails" (2007). *Volume 15 - 2007*. Paper 6.  
<http://preserve.lehigh.edu/cas-lehighreview-vol-15/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Lehigh Review at Lehigh Preserve. It has been accepted for inclusion in Volume 15 - 2007 by an authorized administrator of Lehigh Preserve. For more information, please contact [preserve@lehigh.edu](mailto:preserve@lehigh.edu).



## **Bad Intentions: Why Analyzing Authorial Intentions Fails**

Chris Knight

*"What's in a name? That which we call a rose  
By any other word would smell as sweet."*

-William Shakespeare

In the sixth season of the popular 90's television sitcom *Seinfeld*, a main character's mother, Estelle, calls off an impending divorce after receiving advice from Donna Chang, a woman she assumes is Chinese simply because of her name. But when they finally meet in person and Estelle discovers Chang is actually a white woman from Long Island, Estelle dismisses Chang's advice. She decides to go through with the divorce as planned, prompting Estelle's husband to shout, "So what? She gave you advice; what's the difference if she's not Chinese?"

The difference, apparently, means everything. For a society governed by reason and logic, there is nothing logical about our feelings toward authorship and originality; pieces of forged art, once worth millions, become valueless when their true authors are exposed, though the pieces were lavished with praise for years. In literature, the same tired story lines and clichéd characters are used repeatedly, but once an arbitrary amount of exact language is borrowed, the literary world makes accusations of plagiarism. The established process through which many author-centric critics and readers

## The Lehigh Review

analyze literature, music, movies, and art relies far too much on the author. Neither the author nor the creation matters – if it did, we would throw out the role of creation altogether and focus our criticism simply on the author as a person. By rejecting biography, the reader is empowered to analyze the piece on the actual content and create their own interpretation and meaning. The concept of the author and originality should be thrown out during any objective discussion of literature because regardless of a piece's creation, originality, or authorship, a piece of literature's only honest interpretation must be based on a close reading of the text itself.

In many readers' current biography-centered reading of literature, the first thing they often look at is what the author intended a piece to accomplish, a method betraying any genuine interpretation or meaning derived from the piece. An intentioned author is not a bad thing – most, if not all authors sit down with a clearly defined intention before they write something. Some authors may be writing to propagate their beliefs, some for entertainment, and others for fame and fortune. What makes intentional analysis such a dangerous and flawed system is that readers have no true way to understand the author's actual intention, so the analysis is flawed from the start. People can be astoundingly gullible and often fall prey to what someone tells them to believe rather than what they actually believe. If someone unknowingly reads a propaganda piece, but believed the author intended to write an accurate text, they would be predisposed to agree with the piece because they considered intent. However, if they read the piece objectively, they would notice subtleties in language and flawed logic that was designed to corrupt and influence, and question the piece's credibility. Detractors might argue that by considering the intention of an author, we

can determine the motivations behind the piece and better understand the author through the work. But this is an attempt to get to know the author rather than getting to know the piece – material more suitable for an author's biography – not critical analysis. With a close reading of the text and the specific subtleties of language, we can get acquainted with the text and leave the biography of the author to literary historians.

Many critics rely on an author's intention and biography in their analysis, despite its limited and usually subjective implications. According to the essay, The Intentional Fallacy, "There is hardly a problem of literary criticism in which the critic's approach will not be qualified by his view of 'intention'." <sup>6</sup> For a genuine interpretation of text, the consideration of intent needs to change to reflect a better understanding of the work rather than the creator. When Michelangelo spent four years of his life painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, we can assume he did not *intend* for people to assess the art with any consideration of him as an artist, but to instead appreciate the ceiling's majesty and artistry. Similarly, what separates one of the most successful popular music bands of all time, The Beatles, from the worst is they are independent from their work. We don't need to know what was going on in Paul McCartney or John Lennon's life or their specific intention for a song to appreciate the beauty of the song, "Let It Be". The creation is timeless, and an anonymous playing of the song would illicit the same response from an authored playing. The Intentional Fallacy elaborates, saying "to insist on the designing intellect as a *cause* of a poem is not to grant the design or intention as a standard by which the

---

<sup>6</sup> Wimsatt, William, and Monroe Beardsley. "The Intention Fallacy." The Verbal Icon (1954): 3.

critic is to judge the worth of the poet's performance.<sup>7</sup> " In other words, if the author *intends* to create a piece that will bring the reader to tears, then the piece fails unless it manages to actually bring the reader to tears. According to The Intentional Fallacy, "Judging a poem is like judging a pudding or a machine. One demands that it work ... A poem can be only through its meaning – since its medium is words – yet it is, simply is, in the sense that we have no excuse for inquiring what part is intended or meant.<sup>8</sup> " Continuing in our artistic analogy, it may appear we run into problems with famous artists like Pablo Picasso, some of whose lesser drawings resemble little more than a toddler's scratch on a napkin. On closer analysis, however, this improves the argument – the doodles and scribbles he spent minutes composing have no artistic value, but are only relics of the fame his truly great paintings and sculptures he created earlier in his life. The doodles, in other words, are a meaningless contribution to art.

Bringing up the author does not add to our discussion, but rather, takes away from it through several means. The most obvious drawback of an author is that awareness of the author narrows possible viewpoints. Without an author, a piece becomes limitless in its possibilities, whereas with an author we have significantly less variability. As Roland Barthes said in The Death of the Author, "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing."<sup>9</sup> When readers think they know who an author is, they scrutinize every word of text with our bias of who they think the author embodies. A

---

<sup>7</sup> (Wimsatt and Beardsley 4)

<sup>8</sup> (Wimsatt and Beardsley 4)

<sup>9</sup> Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." Image - Music - Text (1968): 147.

reader's opinion on gender, race, stereotypes, and sexuality will invariable creep onto their reading, no matter how enlightened or neutral someone claims to be. A good sized novel is about 100,000 words, but surprisingly, just two words on the front cover could completely change a reader's interpretation of the book.

There is little purposeful reason to attach an author's name to a critical analysis because when writing, a severe disconnect occurs between the author and the text, making an author's inclusion irrelevant. In The Death of the Author, it says "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing."<sup>10</sup> Whereas film, theater, or narration betrays the author, writing is undeniably neutral, allowing the author to skirt into the widest range of possible material. When Vladimir Nabokov writes Lolita, a novel from the perspective of Humbert Humbert, a man sexually obsessed with a 12-year-old girl, the author does not equate to the text – the text stands by itself. William Faulkner was able to take the voice of a Vardaman Bundren, a young rambling, incoherent child in As I Lay Dying. Most literary historians would agree that Franz Kafka never transformed into a man-sized bug, but his short story, The Metamorphosis, acquires the voice regardless.. If we make the voice and the author as a single entity, it damages the author, who never intended to be the voice, and it damages the voice, which never intended to be the author. Tomasevskij says, "The author becomes a witness to and a living participant in his novels, a living hero. A double transformation takes place: heroes are taken for living

---

<sup>10</sup> (Barthes 142)

## The Lehigh Review

personages, and poets become living heroes – their biographies become poems.<sup>11</sup>” Writing levels the playing field of communications to create equal opportunities to be heard, that is, unless we include authorship.

To further the complications of authorship, its use to judge a piece isn’t reliable, as a large amount of literature is attributed to authors who never existed or misrepresented themselves as another. Some authors decided to conceal their identity with pen names to grant them a degree of otherwise lacking credibility. Mary Anne Evans wrote under the pen name George Eliot, not because she thought it would enhance the actual text, but because women did not receive the same amount seriousness as their male counterparts. Theodore Geisel changed his pen name to Dr. Seuss for less conventional reasons – he liked the way the word rhymed. Others have concealed their identity by limiting and obfuscating the use of their name, such as British author Joanne Rowling, who took the pen name J.K. Rowling so young readers wouldn’t be turned off to her stories because of her gender. Even if authors use real names, readers are still judging their biography on what they or their publishing companies have provided. Biography is often exploited as a way to increase sales and interest in an author– rarely to benefit the reader. Readers have little way of knowing if information about the author is accurate or inflated. Most famous for the exaggerated persona have been the rappers, who often boast about their on rough backgrounds, criminal lifestyles, and illicit activity, despite living sheltered lives from million-dollar suburban houses. The legitimacy of any

---

<sup>11</sup> Tomasevskij, Boris. "Literature and Biography." Changing Conceptions of Authorship

authorship is suspect, be it their actual claimed identity or biography.

The author is irrelevant to their creations because a work should speak for itself. If a painting, a sculpture, a music composition, or writing is worthy of praise because it is masterfully done, then it is worth of praise. Conversely, if something is of poor quality and fails as an artwork, then the piece fails as an artwork, even if the piece might be historically significant or relevant. The problem many people make when they look at literature is they mistake literary criticism for biographical criticism. Literature and Biography says, "We must remember that creative literature exists, not for literary historians, but for readers, and we must consider how the author's biography operates in the reader's consciousness."<sup>12</sup> When researching the biography of an author, the author's lifestyle, writings, history and impact are very significant, but that is because considering the author's life itself as somewhat of a piece of art. When critics shift the focus from the author's life to the author's work, however, everything about the author must be thrown out to have an impartial discussion on the piece. Any departure from the work represents a failure on the critic's part because it is irrelevant to discussion. When a critic finds that Henry James' The Aspern Papers was inspired from James' real life stay with Constance Fenimore Wilson, which is certainly interesting from the perspective of biographical information, the additional information bears no impact on the way a work is read. If critics try to apply James' real life to The Aspern Papers, it hurts their analysis because instead of focusing on what the piece is saying about the privacy of writers, they instead focus on what James was saying on his real life, something which should have no

---

<sup>12</sup> (Tomasevskij)



impact on our understanding. Boris Tomasevskij agrees in his essay, Literature and Biography, when he writes about the problems with joining the author and his works.

Unpublished documents and biographical 'findings' mark an unhealthy sharpening of interest in the documentary literary history, that is, history that is concerned with mores, personalities, and with the interrelationship between writers and their milieu. Most of the 'documents' are relevant, not to literature or its history, but rather to the study of the author as a man (if not the study of his brothers and aunts).<sup>13</sup>

Once we begin to consider the life of the author in relation to the piece, we lose all objectivity in our discussion, and instead it becomes a "study of the author as a man." When the critic or reader knows the author beforehand, they cannot objectively view the piece because their perception is warped.

Originality is another false concept behind authorship that misleads readers into thinking they are getting something they are not. The problem most readers make is they assume originality and uniqueness to be the same. Few would argue that every piece isn't unique; from a Web search of two words to nine words, the odds of an exact phrasing of words went from over 11 million to just 9 words.<sup>14</sup> In other words, uniqueness is easy – being original is hard. To be truly original, one must remove all outside literary influences, teachers, people in their lives, parents and any other aspect that could have a tangible outcome on your writing. Authors

---

<sup>13</sup> (Tomasevskij)

<sup>14</sup> Collins, Paul. "Dead Plagiarists Society." Slate 21 Nov 2006 12 Dec 2006 <<http://www.slate.com/toolbar.aspx?action=print&id=2153313>>.

draw on their favorite pieces of literature and influences of their lives, intentionally or unintentionally, so when we read Wilde or Woolf, we're really getting every other influence in Wilde's or Woolf's life filtered through them. Even with a more relaxed definition of originality, with rare exception literature is comprised of the same themes, characters, motifs, and symbols, just mixed up in different ways. Though they differ slightly in their context, we see similar ideas used again and again in literature. A reader can benefit by ignoring the concept of originality altogether and assessing the work as it stands, regardless if the work is completely original or not. When an author takes on a work, it becomes their own and an entirely new text, whether they create the work from scratch or are heavily influenced by others. The interest comes from what they do with the words and influences, not what those influences are.

Our definitions of what would constitute the difference between legitimate and illegitimate borrowing of plot structures, themes, characters, and situations is so loosely defined, the distinction is lost. The line is so blurred that it would be impossible to write out what makes something legitimate, except that someone would know it when they saw it. For example, if an author bases a work on another author or situation intentionally and obviously, but gives no attribution, would we say that is stealing or plagiarism? Many authors accused of plagiarism say parts of their work were unintentionally lifted from another, simply because the work had such an importance in their lives. In Dennis Dutton's discussion of forgery and plagiarism of famous artwork, he finds that it is quite possible, if not unavoidable to carry over certain aspects of other works we have seen.

...it is possible to unintentionally plagiarize. Without realizing what I am doing, I might remember and carry

## The Lehigh Review

over into my work elements (verbal, musical, pictorial) I have experienced in works by other people: if my unwitting borrowing is quantitatively sufficient, I can be accused of plagiarism, though I may not be fully aware of the extent of my borrowing.<sup>15</sup>

The point here is that regardless of where we find borrowing and influential ideas in a work, it still does not change the work. With the coming of new technologies such as comprehensive book searches, it is likely that many famous authors will be found to have used similar phrases in their most famous works, but that changes absolutely nothing in the enjoyment and understanding of the text as it stands. Even if we go as far to say someone completely copied someone else's work as their own, it still does not change the work or any gain *we* derive from that work. As Dutton says, "It is only the career and reputation of an individual that is affected by plagiarism, not our understanding of an important body of work."<sup>16</sup> In short, who cares if someone steals from someone else? If by finding out information behind a piece of work or its author it damages our understanding of the work, then those findings are irrelevant.

In the rising digital age, it is likely that originality, authorship, and intent will become further blurred in definition. The very nature of the Web is anonymous, its content borrowed, and the intent of the author veiled behind a curtain of zeroes and ones. The music, video and much of the content on the Web is created from a mix of authors sampling from thousands of other authors, to the point that the author

---

<sup>15</sup> Dutton, Denis. "Forgery and Plagiarism." Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics 1998 12 Dec 2006

<[http://denisdutton.com/forgery\\_and\\_plagiarism.htm](http://denisdutton.com/forgery_and_plagiarism.htm)>.

<sup>16</sup> (Dutton 4)

becomes so obscured that it vanishes altogether. As more obscure writers make their way to prominence through the greater exposure granted by the Internet and cheap self-publishing, we will find biography becoming less and less relevant – and for the better. The benefits derived from attaching an authorship to a text, artwork, or piece usually serve the author and his own fame or reputation. Rarely is the reader's appreciation and understanding of a text benefited from knowing where the piece came from. Far more can be learned from a piece if we take it as a stand-alone text that is to be assessed by the actual words. When reading, the only thing we can trust is what we truly know to be real: the words in front of us.